

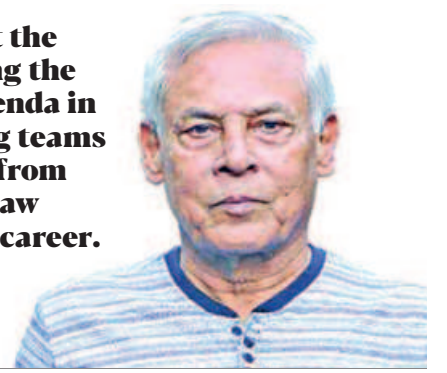
# SPORT



## The harsh realities for REFEREES

It seems to me that the referees are blowing the whistle with an agenda in some cases. The big teams are getting favour from the referees like I saw during my playing career.

GOLAM SARWAR TIPU, former captain and coach of national team



### 'Refereeing here is more like a bizarre investment'

Former FIFA referee Mansur Azad is renowned for his track record of conducting matches with authority and without bias, irrespective of big teams present on the pitch. The intimidating figure, as far as local players and higher officials are concerned, shared his thoughts regarding the local refereeing scenario to *The Daily Star's* Ashfaq Ul Mushfiq during an interview. The excerpts are below:

**DS:** What's your take on the recent controversial refereeing decisions which hogged the spotlight in an unprecedented fashion?

**Mansur Azad (MA):** When someone participates in any sporting event, he has to accept that both winning and losing are part of the game. Of course, the referees make mistakes too. You see, when a player has a bad game, he is given a chance to rectify before the next game. So, referees should also be given proper time to work on their abilities and improve.

**DS:** Why are referees unanimously disinterested in conducting Saif Sporting Club's matches following national captain Jamal Bhuiyan's outburst?

**MA:** We have to view this from multiple contexts. First, you will see in international football, there exists more than five or six cameras to analyse any such occurrence. However, we have only one or two usually.

So, from the footage, if it's not visible that Jamal [Bhuiyan] had kicked the referee, it could be a false accusation. But you see, all four referees had sat together post-match to reassess their decisions taken throughout the match. Thus, when the match report states that Jamal Bhuiyan kicked the referee, it's not the referee who's only saying it, but rather, he's backed by the entire refereeing team along with the match commissioner.

**DS:** What factors influence refereeing decisions?

**MA:** I think it's the ground officials of the big teams who inflict most chaos. Even if the decisions go in their team's favour, they still shout and curse the referees in unspeakable language and the younger or the inexperienced referees may fall victim to it on occasions.

**DS:** Is it true that referees receive money or gifts from teams as incentives to give decisions in their favour?

**MA:** Most of the time they come as rumours or allegations from a losing side. However, I sincerely welcome investigations on football-refereeing. If one or two can be found out, it can bring a huge change.

**DS:** Do you think the salary of the referees is good enough to make a decent livelihood?

**MA:** Refereeing here is more like a bizarre investment. A referee has to pay for his own transportation, livelihood all throughout the season and forward the bill to the federation. It then takes one or two years for the federation to process and pay the referees, who are sometimes given 500 takas as honorarium but that's about it.

I know a referee who still hasn't received his due payment for the 2012-13 season, which led to him quitting the profession. This is just one of the thousand cases in Bangladesh.



It might be that the referees made some mistakes at the early stage of the season and now they are compensating for those mistakes. Now everyone feels referees are making mistakes intentionally.

Shafiqul Islam Manik, coach

Referees can make mistakes, but some mistakes do really look intentional. Referees also don't have consistency in making decisions on similar offences, which creates controversy.

Kamal Babu, coach

There have been some mistakes, but those are not intentional. We don't want foreign referees officiating here. However, there is a gap in quality between former referees and the current ones, which needs to be filled.

Azad Rahman, BFF's head of referees

ATIQUÉ ANAM

**Incident 1:** Police vs Bashundhara Kings, Independence Cup semifinal, BSSMKS, Dec 14, 2021.

Police FC were drawing 1-1 against Bashundhara Kings when their Afghan forward Amerdin Sharifi went through on goal on a long ball, but the assistant referee's flag went up. That was a decision which took everyone by surprise. Police went on to lose that match in extra time as their hopes of a maiden final appearance ended. Photo of Sharifi's hand gesture -- asking how much



money the refs received to blow the whistle against his side -- was widely circulated on social media.

**Incident 2:** Saif vs Sk Russel, league match, Kings Arena, Feb 13, 2022  
Saif Sporting Club's centre-back Riyadul Hasan Rafi was in a slight tussle for ball control with opposition forward Mahbubur Rahman Jewel inside the box, with the latter taking a fall and the referee, Bituraj Barua, pointing to the spot. The spot-kick was converted, ending Saif's 100 per cent record after the first two matches. Replays, however, suggested there was minimal contact between the two players. Saif players surrounded the referee following the incident where things got a little out of control and the referee later claimed that Saif captain Jamal Bhuiyan had kicked him during the protests.

These are two of the many incidents which grabbed headlines, more prominently than results and performances, since the start of the football season in December last year. The title race has intensified tremendously in recent years and so have the controversies surrounding the fairness of decisions and questions over the standard of refereeing.

Refereeing decisions are a constant source of debate around the footballing world, and despite the availability of highly-trained match officials and the latest technologies at



disposal, including Video Assistant Referee (VAR), the top competitions in the world still get a fair amount of controversial decisions.

Just last week, Everton were denied a genuine penalty against Manchester City in a Premier League match, a decision which denied the Toffees a point, keeping them close to the relegation zone. However, the referees' chief later acknowledged that they got it wrong and apologised to Everton. Although the apology will not help Everton in their battle for survival, the admission still

Category	Number
FIFA ref	4 (1 female)
FIFA asst ref	8 (1 female)
National level ref	75+
Class One ref	175+
Class Two ref	750+
Class Three ref	5000+

implies that the mistake was unintentional and the process of reconciliation is on.

The reality in our football, though, is different. We hardly see referees or the referees' committee owning up to their mistakes or being held accountable for those. Although there is a process of evaluation and disciplining of referees in place here, the number of sanctions against referees is far too little compared to the number of apparent mistakes that are made on the pitch.

What lies at the heart of this malaise, though, is the desperate status of our referees: lack of remuneration and training along with constant pressure from different quarters -- all combining to make referees' job the least appealing and the most strenuous.

A top-category referee here gets around

Tk 5300 if he's conducting a Premier League match within the city, a remuneration which is far too little even when one considers just one aspect of his expense: the daily nutritional intake required to keep him fit for officiating.

A referee is not just the least paid person on the pitch, he is also the least respected too. He would be subject to physical assault and slur from the players, club officials and fans if his decisions go against them.

It is a culture of fear within which referees work, hence, a questionable blow of the whistle or a dubious raising of the offside flag does not necessarily indicate that the match official is biased.

Having said that, the possibility of being influenced by the clubs cannot be ruled out completely, especially since there is an overlap of club ownership and federation positions in our country.

What can definitely help here is the VAR, and the idea of having VAR in BPL has been floated by some of the high-ups in the federation. However, when one considers that the cost of installing VAR (Tk 8-9 cr) would far exceed the league's budget, especially when the league can't even lure a decent title sponsor, the assertion of having VAR does not just sound ludicrous but also seems like an eyewash.

The other suggestion that came from within the federation is having some foreign referees conduct crucial title-decisive matches. Then again, who gets to decide which matches are crucial and title-decisive matches? This is an argument that will certainly drive a wedge among the clubs,

PER MATCH HONORARIUM IN BPL	Amount
Referee from outside Dhaka:	Tk 8100
Referee from inside Dhaka:	Tk 5300
Assistant referee from outside Dhaka:	Tk 7900
Assistant referee from inside Dhaka:	Tk 5100
Fourth official from outside Dhaka:	Tk 7500
Fourth official from inside Dhaka:	Tk 4700

leading to more questions than answers.

Instead of investing in VAR or foreign referees, the suggestion should be to empower the local referees by improving their pay-scale, investing in their training and recruitment and making the profession a more appealing and respected one, so much so that the referees do not fall to the glare or the lure.

## 'Surrounding criticisms create pressure'

Apart from being the Bangladesh Football Federation's (BFF) senior vice-president, chairman of the professional league management committee and the finance committee, Abdus Salam Mursheedy is also playing a pivotal role in the country's football as the chairman of the BFF referees committee. *The Daily Star's* Anisur Rahman interviewed him to shed light on the recent disputes over the refereeing decisions in the domestic circuit. The excerpts are as follows:

**The Daily Star (DS):** How do you view the ongoing debate over the refereeing decisions in top-flight football?

**Abdus Salam Mursheedy (ASM):** I'm happy to keep all tournaments rolling amidst severe limitations. We have successfully completed two very competitive tournaments while the Bangladesh Premier League is still ongoing. Although there

was no dispute over the referees in the Independent Cup, it all began from the Federation Cup.

However, we have been assigning the referees from our BPL pool while the experienced referees were appointed to conduct big matches. Besides, the performances of referees have been evaluated every day and the rectification process is facilitated by analysing the video footage. But since all of these have been happening behind the scenes, you don't know it.

**DS:** Why are the disputes over the refereeing decisions being discussed more than any other seasons?

**ASM:** Referees are also making mistakes in different leagues in Europe. This time around, there are a lot of title aspirant teams who are not getting their desired results and raising questions about the



standard of the referees. But I must admit, the referees have committed some errors but they are also rectifying themselves.

**DS:** What is the way to come out of this dispute?

**ASM:** We have limitations. If we can improve our current materials and create confidence among all, then it's possible to get out of such disputes. I think they aren't blowing the whistle badly but the surrounding criticisms create pressure for them.

**DS:** Is there any impact on the referees' job when the higher-ups of Bangladesh Football Federation criticise them?

**ASM:** If the responsible persons or the higher-ups of the federation talk about the referees' decisions, then the referees find themselves under a more nerve-racking situation.